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FINAL PLAN FOR SUSTAINED REDUCTION OF NON-NATIVE RATS, CATS AND MONGOOSES ADOPTED

John H. King, Virgin Islands National Park Superintendent, announced today the availability of the *Final Sustained Reduction of Non-native Rats, Cats and Mongooses from Virgin Islands National Park Environmental Assessment (EA)*. This represents a long-range program for minimizing impacts from a variety of feral, non-native species within the National Park. Superintendent King noted: "Your comments and concerns received during the earlier public review of the Draft and Final EA's were considered in preparation of the Final EA and the completion of the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) process. Thank you for your participation in this planning effort that is critical to the protection and preservation of the Park's endangered and native wildlife species."

According to Rafe Boulon, Chief of Resources Management: "The purpose of the proposed action is to undertake a sustained reduction of non-native rats, cats and mongooses from Virgin Islands National Park. By reducing their population size inside the Park, adverse impacts to visitors, residents and natural and cultural resources will decrease. The program purpose is to reduce rat, cat and mongoose populations to levels where they produce minimal or no damage to Park resources or threats to visitor and employee safety. The program is therefore, termed a "sustained reduction," because once the rat, cat and mongoose populations are reduced to acceptable levels, the smaller populations will be maintained at that level or below. Collectively, rat, cat and mongoose populations pose a very large threat to the native natural resources, long-term resource management programs of the Park, and visitor health and safety."

Human-caused Wildlife Extinctions on Islands

It is now widely accepted that the current rates of species extinctions are dramatically higher than background rates, most current extinctions can be directly attributed to human activity, and for ethical, cultural, aesthetic and economic reasons, the current extinction rate is cause for considerable concern. Human-caused extinctions can be roughly divided into four broad categories: non-sustainable use of resources, habitat destruction, pollution, and introduced non-native species.

Results of the first three categories are often acute and can directly affect human and non-native wildlife welfare on an observable time scale. The human related impacts have made them the focus of public environmental concern. Native wildlife in island ecosystems, however, are particularly vulnerable to both the first three categories as well as the impacts of introduced non-native species. Of the 484 recorded animal extinctions since 1600, 75% have been island endemics. Introduced species were completely or partially responsible for 67% of these extinctions (based on the 147 island species for which the cause of extinction is known). Thus, some impacts of introduced species are irreversible and at least as devastating as the other

categories. Once established, introduced species often become permanent in an ecological time-scale unless intentionally removed.

Islands are important for the conservation of biodiversity for four reasons: 1) a large percentage of their biota are endemic species and subspecies; 2) they are important breeding areas for seabirds, marine mammals, and sea turtles, which forage over thousands of square kilometers of ocean but are dependent on relatively small amounts of protected land on islands for breeding and nesting; 3) many islands are sparsely inhabited or uninhabited by humans, keeping socioeconomic costs of protection low; 4) the species and ecological communities on islands have evolved in natural fragments, making them less susceptible than continental species to the problems of habitat fragmentation caused by small reserve size. In summary, by restoring and protecting islands, functioning unmanaged ecosystems can be maintained without large expenditures or significant conflict with local human populations.

People have accidentally or intentionally introduced hundreds of exotic species into natural communities worldwide, and while many die out, some persist and become pests. Wild animals, which establish breeding populations after being introduced by humans, are termed exotic. Feral animals, by contrast, were introduced from domestic animals and established breeding populations in the wild. For purposes of simplicity in this EA, all animals that establish breeding populations in the Park will be called “non-native.” All of these species disrupt complex native ecological communities, jeopardize endangered and native plants and animals, and degrade natural habitats.

National Park Service Mandates

The National Park Service Organic Act of 1916 mandates the parks to “conserve the scenery and the natural and historic objects and the wild life therein...{to} leave them unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations.” Changes to the natural communities from human actions in the parks, including the continuous and unabated invasion of exotic and feral species, are contrary to the intentions of the Act. In fact, the NPS is mandated to destroy animals that are determined to be injurious to native flora and fauna (NPS Management Policies 2001).

Management of populations of exotic plant and animal species, up to and including eradication, will be undertaken whenever such species threaten park resources or public health. High priority will be given to the management of exotic species that have a substantial impact on Park resources and that can be expected to be successfully controlled.

Consistency with the Virgin Islands National Park Service General Management Plan (1983) and Resource Management Plan (1999): non-native and exotic pests such as feral rats and mongooses, as well as feral and free-ranging domestic cats, are identified as a threat to native fauna and flora and must be controlled. This program is also consistent with the Virgin Islands Coastal Zone Management Program (1978) that promotes conservation of ecologically significant resource areas and preserves the function and ecological integrity of these areas and the wildlife therein.

Endangered and Threatened Species Impacts

The National Park Service will identify and promote the conservation of all Federally listed threatened, endangered, or candidate species within Park boundaries and their critical habitats. All management actions for protection and perpetuation of special status species will be determined through the Park's Resource Management Plan. Management and monitoring programs should be coordinated with other Territorial and Federal agencies.

The Endangered Species Act (ESA) requires that actions authorized, funded or carried out by Federal agencies not jeopardize the continued existence of listed species. Under section 7(a)(2) of the ESA Federal agencies are required to consult with the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) on actions which may affect listed species or critical habitat. Because this sustained reduction program proposes actions that may affect three Federally listed plant species and eight Federally listed wildlife species on St. John Island, NPS conferred with USFWS on likely effects to these species. The USFWS determined that this action will have no impact on listed species, in fact, it will most likely benefit them.

Ecological Restoration Program to Reduce Non-native Predator Populations

Superintendent King notes that: "Because the Park boundary is entirely permeable with private or territorial lands, small mammals readily enter from adjacent lands. Also, dozens of private inholdings exist within the boundary throughout the Park, and many have residences. Thus, small animals inhabiting adjacent lands will always enter the Park and attempt to establish breeding populations. For these reasons the permanent elimination (eradication) of non-native rats, cats or mongooses from the Park is impossible. Therefore, feasible alternatives must focus on regular efforts to reduce the population size and minimize impacts from each species. The key is to manage populations in an Integrated Pest Management (IPM) approach that includes regular inspections and monitoring, upgraded sanitation, retrofitting trash receptacles and rat-proofing structures."

The restoration program will be accomplished in three phases. In the first phase, various techniques will be employed to reduce harborage and food resources for the present populations. In phase two, techniques will be used quickly to reduce populations to acceptable levels at sites such as Hawksnest, Trunk, Cinnamon, Francis, Leinster, Saltpond and Lameshur bays, and Annaberg. Phase three will be to monitor and remove individuals that exceed threshold levels. Some methods, which are necessary to quickly and safely reduce the different non-native species' populations, will differ from the methods used to maintain the populations at a low level. To address these challenges, the Final Environmental Assessment includes:

PHASE I – Planning, Logistics, Consensus-Building, Food/Habitat Reduction

1. Prepare an Environmental Assessment for Non-native Rat, Cat and Mongoose Reduction.
2. Establish general human activity zones and tolerance limits for each zone and species.
3. Monitor food and trash (both food and non-food) handling and storage facilities, areas, practices, receptacles and schedules throughout the Park.

4. Inspect landscaping and buildings in high and medium human use zones with specific attention to non-native rat, mongoose and cat harborage, usage and access.
5. Develop basic Non-native Rat, Cat and Mongoose Action Plans. Initiate and develop significant consensus-building efforts with local wildlife groups including the Audubon Society, St. John Animal Care Center, Humane Society of St. Thomas/St. John and the Environmental Association of St. Thomas/St. John.
6. Educate key NPS and concessionaire personnel about the Action Plans.
7. Implement measures within the Park to reduce harborage, food availability and food/building access by non-native rats, mongooses and cats (by a combination of methods):
 - a. Comprehensive inspections;
 - b. Mechanical rodent-proofing techniques;
 - c. Revise schedules to increase the frequency of trash pickup;
 - d. Curtail non-native cat feeding practices;
 - e. Issue and require campers to use rodent-proof containers in the campground;
 - f. Retrofit all trash receptacles to exclude non-native rats, cats and mongooses; and
 - g. Improve food storage facilities.

PHASE II – Quick Population Reduction

After implementing Phase I, conduct large-scale direct reduction efforts to rapidly and substantially reduce non-native rat, cat and mongoose populations until acceptable population limits are achieved in cooperation with the U. S. Department of Agriculture's Animal Plant Health Inspection Service / Wildlife Services Division.

Alternative 2. Non-native Rat Control, Proposed Action. For Norway and roof rats, Phase II will consist of a initial single, large scale direct reduction using bait stations with diphacinone or baited live traps throughout the Park. Follow-up trapping/census will reduce populations by approximately 80% of what their current populations are estimated to be through an initial snap-trap census. Rat populations will be monitored and maintained at acceptable levels with continued trapping and use of bait stations.

Alternative 4. Non-native Cat Control, Proposed Action. For domestic cats, Phase II consists of an initial, single, large-scale direct reduction using live traps followed by adoption where possible. The Park will assist the St. John Audubon Society to register domestic cats using free ear-tags and break-away collars. A St. John veterinarian has offered to tattoo ears of domestic cats for the cost of anesthesia. Any collared or tattooed animals will be returned to their owners. Unmarked animals will be provided to the St John Animal Care Center (SJACC). Cats testing positive for Feline Immunodeficiency Virus or Feline Leukemia Virus will be destroyed by American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA) approved methods. Veterinarians working for or subsidized by the SJACC will sterilize cats testing negative for those viral diseases and clip their left ear. These cats will be placed for adoption or released to a feeding station outside the Park boundary. Cats that are recaptured twice after they were treated and released by SJACC will be given to the Humane Society of St. Thomas and St. John.

Follow-up census/trapping efforts will attempt to remove approximately 100% of the 15-30 existing non-native cats at such sites as Trunk, Cinnamon and Francis Bays and Annaberg. Initially, efforts will be made with interested individuals to remove cats from throughout the Park prior to trapping. Traps will be checked at no greater than 6-hour intervals so cats are subjected to minimal stress.

Alternative 6. Non-native Mongoose Control, Proposed Action. For mongooses, Phase II consist of a single, large scale direct reduction using live traps baited with chicken or sardines at selected sites throughout the Park,. Follow-up census/trapping will reduce populations by approximately 80% of what their current populations are estimated to be. Captured mongooses will be humanely euthanized.

PHASE III – Monitor the Sustained Reduction

1. Monitor non-native rat, cat and mongoose populations, harborage, food availability, trash collection schedules, etc. regularly, using checklists. Cat and mongoose populations will be monitored using standard visual census techniques in centers of high human activity on a periodic basis. Feeding of wildlife within the Park must be discontinued. Rats will be trap-censused as described elsewhere, on a periodic basis.
2. Maintain monitoring logs, continue routine building inspections, continue successful landscaping practices, and maintain comprehensive and accurate records.
3. Work effectively and cooperatively with partners including concessionaires, residents and visitors on an ongoing basis. Relationships must be continued as key directors or managers change in the numerous governmental and non-governmental organizations. Develop a comprehensive educational campaign with the partners and together routinely disseminate the information through a variety of media including newspaper, radio, and the Internet.

The timeframe for implementing each phase of the sustained reduction program will be: Phase I and Phase II concurrent for the next twelve months starting in May or June 2002; and Phase III will monitor the populations and other implemented changes, such as habitat and food, indefinitely. The educational component and continued partnerships must be sustained indefinitely.

Copies of the Final Environmental Assessment may be viewed at public libraries and the Park's Visitor Center in Cruz Bay, National Park Headquarters at Christiansted NHS, St. Croix or can be downloaded from the Internet at www.nps.gov/viis or www.friendsvinp.org. Printed or electronic copies of the Final EA can also be requested from the National Park Service at the following address: Resource Management Division; National Park Service; Virgin Islands National Park; 1300 Cruz Bay Creek; St. John, U. S. Virgin Islands 00830; or by calling Rafe_Boulon@nps.gov at (340) 693-8950 extension 224.

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